

Advent 1

November 30, 2008

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I am amazed how we rush through life pushing the seasons and urging those around us to do the same. I think it was the last week of September this year when I saw the first Christmas display in a department store. Apparently in the retail world today the longer the period of preparation for Christmas the better. Pushing the season means more time to sell, hopefully increased profits and the reminder to buyers to begin spending early for Christmas.

I am amazed at the ingenuity the retail market can come up with to entice us into the Christmas spirit three months before December. In the church, however, we are more eager to get through the waiting period. We long for the coming of Christ and the promise of fulfillment at the time when he will come again.

We begin with the cry of the Advent prophet Isaiah. After years in exile the people of Israel wanted God to re-enter their lives in a powerful way. In blunt terms the prophet begs God to be known, "O that you would tear open the heavens and come down, so the mountains would quake at your presence - as when the fire kindles the brushwood and the fire causes water to boil - to make your name known to your adversaries, so that the nations might tremble at your presence!" Come on God, get busy and do something!

The prophet laments the waiting and reminds God that the people have withdrawn. Some have lost their way and no longer walk in the way of the Lord. "Because you hid yourself from us, we transgressed. There is no one who calls on your name or attempts to take hold of you for you have hidden your face from us and delivered us into the hand of our iniquity."

Lament is a good word to use here because it describes what happens when we move from one place to another. You and I live in a world that has moved so quickly from one place to another that we long for that which is lost. It has not been long ago that we lived in peace with our neighbors around the world and unprecedented wealth at home. As the war in Iraq and Afghanistan continues to put our sons and daughters in harm's way, the economy erodes our 401k and hopes to retire, as food prices go up and homes are foreclosed; hope is eroded; we don't know for sure where we are headed. We are not sure when or how we will get there. There is a sense that there will be a tremendous shift in our lives as we move from place to place.

In a way it takes that kind of dramatic shift to get our attention. Sometime after the people of Israel had been marched off into exile by the Babylonians, sometime after their temple had been burned to the ground, and the foundation of the community shaken to the core, Isaiah sends up this cry of pain asking for understanding. "O that you would tear the heavens and come down."

Not just so we can go back to business as usual. Not just so we can consider ourselves the most powerful nation on the face of the earth, consume the majority of the world's goods and feel secure again in our own homes. That is not the point. We cannot go back any more than New Orleans when the last stroke of paint has dried on the last restored building will be exactly like it was before Hurricane Katrina hit. Isaiah was asking for more than just a restoration, as though the people of God could go back to the way it was. Isaiah was crying for a new creation - something new, not yet. Despite the feeling of lament there is room for imagination and hope. That is why Isaiah utters the hopeful word, "Yet, O Lord, you are our Father, we are the clay and you are the potter, we are the work of your hands."

That is an image that most of us understand. If you have ever worked with clay you know it is easily molded and shaped by the potter. Sometimes the shape is not as the potter intends so the potter smashes the clay and starts over again. We are the clay, ever since the Garden of Eden we have not been so good at shaping ourselves into the pot that God intends. We get shaped often by forces beyond our control. We beg God to open the heavens and come down, remember the age old promises - come work us again by forming something new out of us.

Don't we long for someone, something to come from outside and redeem us? Is this not the cry of the prophet Isaiah? The prophet points to the natural world to earthquakes, volcanoes, fire in the sky and the raging creation as signs from God. The prophet knows that such natural disasters can bring people together for a season of peace, cooperation, and hope. We saw this in the wake of September 11, 2001.

People looked inward and decided the material things of the world were not as important as family and friends. They began to engage in jobs that were somehow significant rather than just a means to make money. We began to realize that we cannot make it on our own we need others and we need God.

O that you would tear open the heavens and come down.

The God that we worship tore open the curtain of heaven and came to us, became as one of us. We preach Christ who came among us with great power and might to move our vision from narrow preoccupations to a broader concern for all of creation.

In the Advent season we declare that the prophet's cry has been answered. It is not answered with warfare and violence. It is not answered by exerting power over other people. It is answered when God came among us full of grace and truth. It is answered when Christ is raised from the dead to make all of creation new. It is answered as the Holy Spirit continues to move among us to form us as a church, the Body of Christ in this world.

Perhaps we continue to long for outside intervention because the church is not the witness we could be that God has acted and continues to be active in our lives. Isaiah proclaims the truth that we are all God's people. God is the potter and we are the clay. How we yearn to know that truth in our lives!

Paul writing to the Corinthians reminded them God's grace had been given to them in Jesus Christ. In every way they have been enriched by Jesus in speech and knowledge, not lacking any spiritual gift. God will be faithful to those called into fellowship.

Paul reminds all of us with anticipation Christians live a life of faith, always open to what God has promised to do and always trusting because God is faithful. Anticipation means staying awake, being watchful. Advent is a symbol of the Christian lifestyle, not just a season at the beginning of the liturgical year. Advent is a reminder to be alert to God's presence. Advent is about God breaking open the heavens and coming down to meet us in our sinfulness and need, down to a manger bed, down to a cross, down to an empty tomb.

We spend a lot of time trying to figure out when Christ will come again, we even created a series of books based on the predictions of the end of time. In the process we fail to realize that Christ comes not once, not two or three times but hundreds of times in all of our lives. Advent happens every time we repent, seek God's forgiveness and go in a new way.,Advent reminds us that the wait is worth it.

The heavens have been opened and God has indeed come down.